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ABSTRACT

Noting that the press was criticized during the 1960s for failing to convey to white readers the problems and injustices experienced by black Americans, a study analyzed the nature and amount of civil rights coverage in five newspapers from 1963 through 1980. News coverage concerning blacks was examined in 66 issues from four major newspapers in different geographical areas of the country: the "New York Times," "Atlanta "Constitution," Boston "Globe," and the Chicago "Tribune." The Youngstown (Ohio) "Vindicator," a medium-sized paper, was also studied for contrast. Each newspaper's coverage of black problems as a percentage of total coverage of black Americans was recorded. The results showed that the papers ignored problems experienced by black Americans in the issues sampled from the early 1950s; increased their problem coverage in the 1960s; and provided a great deal more coverage in the 1970s. News coverage from the 1950s, however, indicated the existence of severe injustices that could have been explored, and in the 1960s news coverage focused exclusively on racial discrimination in the South. During all three periods the papers failed to explore the ghetto residents' grievances. Finally, much of the 1960s problem coverage concerned the difficulties of local blacks, but this local emphasis decreased sharply in the 1970s. (HTH)

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Newspaper Coverage of Racial Injustices

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Newspaper Coverage of Racial Injustices

During the civil rights movement the press was criticized by journalists, the Kerner Commission and civil rights leaders for failing to convey to white readers the problems and injustices experienced by black Americans. In addition, newspapers were charged with failing to portray the oppressive conditions of ghetto life, and for ignoring problems of local blacks while focusing on distant racial conflicts. A project was designed to assess the amount and nature of coverage of black problems in five newspapers before, during and after the civil rights movement. Problem stories and news coverage concerning black Americans in 66 issues each of four leading papers and a medium-sized newspaper were analyzed.

The study showed that the papers ignored problems experienced by black Americans in the issues sampled from the early 1950s, increased their problem coverage in the 1960s, and provided much more coverage in the 1970s. News coverage from the 1950s, however, indicated the existence of severe injustices that could have been explored, and in the 1960s news coverage focused exclusively on racial discrimination in the South. The research also indicated that during all three periods the papers failed to explore ghetto residents' grievances. Finally, much of the 1960s problem coverage concerned the difficulties of local blacks, but this local emphasis decreased sharply in the 1970s.

Newspaper Coverage of Racial Injustices

Before the 1954 Supreme Court school desegregation decision, the plight of the black American was just that--a plight, not a news story.[1] This was the observation of a participant in a 1965 conference of professional journalists on the mass media and race relations, and his observation was echoed by reporters at similar conferences held during the mid-1960s.[2] Participants noted that before 1960 the communications media so effectively ignored the severe injustices and oppression experienced by American blacks that many white citizens were largely unaware of them.

Even in the media coverage of the civil rights revolution many black problems, aside from segregation and racial violence in the South, were not explored in depth. National Urban League director Whitney Young said in the mid-1960s that "The press has failed to show that the Negro's grievances are real. To read the newspapers, you might think the Negro is reacting to some mild inconvenience."[3]

A telling measure of whites' ignorance of the problems facing black Americans was a 1967 Gallup poll which found that only one white American in 100 thought blacks were being treated badly, and 75% thought blacks were treated the same as whites. The poll also found that the white public blamed ghetto uprisings

on "outside agitators" and "Negroes demanding too much."[4] Such ignorance of the realities of many black Americans' lives must be attributed at least partly to the media's failure to interpret black reality to whites, even after a decade of coverage of the civil rights struggle.

The Kerner Commission, appointed to investigate the causes of the ghetto riots, stated in its 1968 report that the press had failed to illuminate for white readers the difficulties and frustrations of being black in America. In particular, the Commission stated, the media did not transmit to white readers a sense of the realities of life in the ghetto. "The ills of the ghetto, the difficulties of life there, the Negro's burning sense of grievance, are seldom conveyed," the Commission said.[5]

During a 1960s conference at UCLA on the black American and the press, one journalist noted that because reporters rarely ventured into the black ghetto and rarely wrote of its problems, reporters were as ignorant of local ghetto conditions as their newspapers' readers were, when the riots occurred. They also were just as surprised.[6] Yet the media were widely castigated for not having provided society with warning signals by describing the oppressive conditions of black life in the ghetto.

Typical of the complaints were the words of a Los Angeles press critic, who said that if the papers had written their "voluminous news stories and indignant editorials" before rather than after the 1965 Watts riots, "it's just possible there might not have beeen a Watts." He added that the papers were slow in covering ghettc conditions because they were afraid of offending

their comfortable, middle-class readers who, "presumably, either didn't know about these conditions or, more likely, didn't object to them as long as they were not personally affected."[7]

Paletz and Dunn, in their study of coverage of a 1967 riot in Winston-Salem, suggest another possible reason why the press provided scant coverage of the viewpoint of those involved in the violence. By ignoring rioters' grievances and focusing on attempts to quell the disturbances, the authors suggest, the press may have acted to maintain sociocultural consensus and to protect power and class in the social structure.[8] In a study of Los Angeles' newspapers' coverage of black Americans, Johnson, Sears and McConahay noted that while Los Angeles blacks believed the Watts riot would command white attention to ghetto residents' grievances, whites instead became less sympathetic toward blacks' problems. The city's newspapers reflected white public officals' and white public opinion's interpretation of the riot "as a threat to the public safety, rather than as a symptom of serious problems demanding attention," the authors state.[9]

Besides being accused of failing to inform white readers of the problems facing black Americans, and failing to convey the realities of life in urban ghettos, the press also was criticized during the 1960s for a form of "Afghanistanism." Turner Catledge of the New York Times remarked that "we've had open season on the South here now for some time," and suggested that Northern newspapers might well look to school and residential segregation and other forms of discrimination in their own communities.[10] Other journalists also commented on newspapers' penchant for

covering racial conflicts and injustices in other areas of the country while ignoring problems of blacks in their own readership areas.[11]

Although the literature suggests many inadequacies in press coverage of racial injustices, the subject has seldom been addressed in empirical studies except for the few reports mentioned here. In addition, the topic has not been studied at all since the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Therefore a study of five newspapers' coverage of problems facing blacks before, during and after the civil rights movement was designed to assess the newspapers' coverage of racial injustices.

Questions to be answered by the project were "How much coverage did the newspapers provide of black Americans' problems during the three times periods? What was the nature of the coverage? How much of the problem coverage concerned ghetto residents' grievances? How much concerned the problems of local blacks?"

Method

Four leading newspapers from different geographical areas of the country--the New York Times, the Atlanta Constitution, the Boston Globe, and the Chicago Tribune--were selected for study. They represent the kind of resource-rich, influential papers at which, it was thought, the Kerner Commission was directing its criticisms. For contrast, a medium-sized metropolitan daily also was examined. It was the Youngstown (Ohio) Vindicator, circulation 100,500.

All items concerning black Americans in 66 issues of each newspaper were studied. The issues examined were drawn randomly from a stratified sample of months, weeks of the month and days of the week during selected years of the period studied. Three issues a year were sampled from the four years from 1950 through 1953 to obtain a picture of the papers' coverage of blacks before the civil rights movement gained momentum. Four issues a year from the six years from 1963 through 1968, at the height of the civil rights movement, were examined. Six issues a year for the five even-numbered years from 1972 through 1980, after the confrontational activities of the civil rights movement had ceased, also were sampled.

The recording unit was any newspaper item--news or feature story, editorial or opinion column, letter to the editor, photo or cartoon--that concerned black Americans. Each sample issue was scanned, all pertinent items were measured and recorded, and any item in which the author's main purpose was to make readers aware of a problem facing American blacks was assigned to a category called Black Problems. In order to obtain a clearer picture of the nature of the coverage, notes about the kinds of problems covered and about problems mentioned in news stories also were recorded.

Intercoder reliability was tested by having two persons not involved in the study code four sample issues which included a total of 22 items. Intercoder reliability was .86.

Findings

In Table 1 each newspaper's coverage of black problems is presented as a percentage of that newspaper's total coverage of black Americans in the issues sampled. As the table shows, in the 1950s issues studied only the New York Times provided any information about black problems; it ran one wire service story on housing discrimination in Washington, D.C. In the 1960s four of the five papers ran stories explaining problems facing blacks, although in no case did this kind of coverage account for more than 5% of the papers' total coverage of blacks. By the 1970s, however, all five newspapers were providing coverage of black problems. In three of the papers this kind of coverage rose considerably from what it had been in the previous decade, as a percentage of total coverage of blacks, while in the other two newspapers the percentage of this type of coverage remained the same or decreased slightly.

The study also showed that the problem stories run did not often cover the concerns of ghetto residents as determined by Kerner Commission and Detroit Free Press surveys of riot city ghetto residents about the grievances that had caused the riots. In both surveys police practices was the most intense grievance reported, yet this subject was addressed in only one 1970s story out of all the problem stories coded. The ghetto residents' other greatest concerns--unemployment, inadequate housing and education and recreation facilities--were covered in only two out of the 11 problem stories found in the 1960s issues coded, and in only seven of the 33 problem stories coded from the 1970s.

TABLE 1

Mean number of column inches per issue
of coverage of black problems as percentage of total coverage
of blacks in five newspapers during three time periods

Newspaper	Coverage	Time Period		
		1950s	1960s	1970s
NYT	Black problems	1.83 (10%)	3.58 (2%)	10.37 (11%)
	Total coverage	18.33	147.63	96.98
AC	Black problems		3.63 (5%)	8.09 (9%)
	Total coverage	22.58	75.77	88.48
BG	Black problems		3.65 (5%)	2.67 (3%)
	Total coverage	4.55	66.14	86.85
CT	Black problems			10.00 (13%)
	Total coverage	32.00	102.59	79.83
YV	Black problems		1.47 (3%)	.70 (3%)
	Total coverage	17.21	45.76	27.81

Table 2 shows that during the 1960s most of the papers covering black problems devoted a good deal of that coverage to the problems of local black citizens. By the 1970s, however, this attention to the local situation had diminished considerably. The stories on local problems run during the 1960s were often sidebars to current news stories or installments in a series about local situations, and most of them were written by local reporters. Conversely, although many more stories on black problems were run during the 1970s, most of these were wire and news service stories and syndicated columns about the problems of blacks across the nation.

The previous discussion has concerned the kind of problem stories run in the issues coded. However, the reader was able to obtain from news stories on other subjects some impression of different kinds of problems faced by blacks. It seems worthwhile to include here some narrative description of these situations, both in order to show the kind of picture a reader could obtain of problems facing blacks, and also as a separate measure of existing problems.

Although only one story on problems experienced by blacks was found in the 45 issues coded from the 1950s, some short news stories found provide a glimpse of the kinds of discrimination facing blacks at this time. For example, one article concerned University of North Carolina students protesting the university administration's refusal to allow six black law students to sit in the white section at football games. A New York Times story told of the NAACP demanding a first-degree murder indictment

TABLE 2

Mean number of column inches per issue
of coverage of local problems as percentage of total coverage
of black problems in five newspapers during three time periods

Newspaper	Coverage	Time Period		
		1950s	1960s	1970s
NYT	Local problems		1.92 (54%)	2.03 (20%)
	Total prob. coverage	1.83	3.58	10.37
AC	Local problems		3.17 (87%)	1.23 (15%)
	Total prob. coverage		3.63	8.09
BG	Local problems		3.04 (83%)	1.07 (40%)
	Total prob. coverage		3.65	2.67
CT	Local problems			.45 (5%)
	Total prob. coverage			10.00
YV	Local problems			
	Total prob. coverage		1.47	.70

against an off-duty white policeman who allegedly shot two black men outside a bar in White Plains, N.Y. because he objected to their presence in the bar. (In 1980 the same newspaper reported blacks protesting the fact that five Miami policemen accused of beating a black insurance salesman to death had been charged only with manslaughter, and were acquitted.) Another story, about a black man who had qualified for the governor's race in Louisiana in the early 1950s, included the explanation "Negroes have been voting in Louisiana for years."

More problem stories were found in the 1960s issues coded, but the papers' news coverage gave readers a vivid picture of just one problem facing American blacks--the white Southerner's implacable determination to maintain a segregated way of life.

Much of the news coverage from this period showed Southern public schools, restaurants and amusement parks closing to avoid the necessity of integration, a black musician being arrested for trying to check into a Louisiana motel, a black woman being arrested for standing in a "white women only" voting line, and Governor Wallace publicly telling the Alabama legislature to find ways to prevent blacks from being elected to local public office.

And this was only the non-violent resistance portrayed. Also presented were stories of civil rights workers in the South being murdered by snipers, peaceful civil rights demonstrators being beaten while white police stood by watching (or did the beating themselves), and children being killed by bombs planted in black churches. Despite the problem stories printed during this time, the clearest picture presented of the difficulties

facing blacks was confined to the South--segregation of public facilities and disenfranchisement there, and white Southerners' determination to maintain that situation.

In the 1970s issues sampled the newspapers began, for almost the first time in all the coverage coded, to present statistical information that showed the inequality that existed between blacks and whites in many areas of life, most notably health care, income and employment. Other stories warned of continued low voter registration and discrimination against would-be voters in the South. Throughout the 1970s stories and editorials noted that progress toward equality for blacks was slowing, civil rights gains achieved during the 1960s were being threatened, and white hate groups were gaining in numbers and acceptability.

Conclusions

The paucity of problem stories found in the 1950s issues coded, when compared with the hints provided by news stories of the oppression experienced by black Americans during this period, bears out the criticism that before the Supreme Court school desegregation decision the black man's plight was not considered by the press to be a newsworthy story.

Although the problem coverage increased during the 1960s, it represented a surprisingly small percentage of the five newspapers' total coverage of blacks during this period, considering the newsworthiness of the civil rights story at the time. Usually, when covering a major running story, the newspapers studied assigned reporters to write sidebar stories on various

peripheral aspects of the phenomenon and on the background of the situation. One might have expected that during the 1960s the papers examined would have devoted considerable attention to explaining to their readers the causes--the problems facing blacks--behind the civil rights movement. That they provided so little attention to black problems helps explain both the Kerner Commission's and civil rights leaders' charges that they had not clarified for white readers the forces underlying the movement.

In addition, the news coverage of this period focused almost exclusively on problems experienced by blacks because of racial discrimination and hostility in the South. It's easy to see why the average white reader, denied any real insight into the nature of other kinds of difficulties facing blacks in other areas of the country, would assume that once civil rights for blacks in the South were secured, the nation's most pressing racial problems would be solved.

Surprisingly, most of the papers studied devoted much more space, in both column inches and as a proportion of their total coverage of blacks, to black problems during the 1970s. This increased attention may have resulted from a greater sensitivity to the situation of black Americans on the part of newspaper managements. It may also have occurred because the racial tumult of the 1960s had largely ceased, so that black grievances were perhaps perceived as less threatening than they were in the 1960s.

Less encouraging is the finding that the papers studied still were apparently unwilling to come to grips with the

phenomenon of the black ghetto and the situation of the people who live there. Few of the grievances presented by the ghetto residents surveyed by the Kerner Commission and the Detroit Free Press were explored by the newspapers during any of the three periods studied.

Yet these problems continue largely unabated. A 1981 Gannett News Service special report on the situation of the American black warned, "There is widespread agreement among urban experts that little has changed in America's cities in the past decade, except that in some the quality of life has declined even further, central cities have become blacker and poorer, and those stuck there have fewer options to escape." The report noted that the same ghetto social and economic conditions that the Kerner Commission found had persisted through 1981, and remain largely unsolved.[12] It should be noted that this report was issued even before the recent economic recession worsened the situation.

This information suggests that newspapers should have been, in the 1970s, exploring and presenting to readers information on conditions prevailing in the ghettos, and on the existence of such conditions in their own cities. Since the grievances were those the ghetto residents said had led to the riots, and since the problems that caused the grievances seem unalleviated, a replay of the events of the 1960s seems inevitable for the future: the ghettos will again explode, the public and the media will once more be shocked and stunned, and the media will again be castigated for failing to alert the public to severe social problems until violence has erupted.

Of course, increased press attention to ghetto problems is no guarantee that the general public will take notice or care, or that any remedial action will be taken. That same observation, in fact, could be made about increased press coverage of black problems in general. However, some kind of general knowledge of a problem's existence is necessary before any kind of ameliorative measures can be undertaken, and the press could help to provide that awareness.

Another finding with negative implications was that during the 1970s the papers devoted much less attention to the problems of local blacks than they had in the 1960s. During this latter period the papers apparently ceased to use their own reporters to explore difficulties experienced by blacks in their cities. Although the papers ran many stories about, for instance, unemployment and health problems of blacks nationwide, and about discrimination against blacks in the criminal justice system, they did not localize the stories to explore these same situations among blacks in their own circulation areas. A form of "Afghanistanism" seemed to continue to operate.

In summary, most of the newspapers studied ran much more coverage of black problems in the 1970s than they had in the previous periods, and did a more thorough job of explaining to their readers the problems facing millions of black Americans. Although the coverage exhibited weaknesses--there still was not much of it, it included little coverage of the situation in the ghettos, it was not locally oriented--apparently the newspapers' managements realized that serious racial injustices still exist,

and were attempting to inform their readers about them. Increased attention to these problems is needed if newspapers are going to fulfill their responsibility to interpret various segments of society to each other, and make readers aware of the existence of social injustices before they erupt and infect the entire society.

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